

From The Inyo Register

Foster group home for at-risk youth in works

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Inyo County is apparently such a great place to live that juvenile offenders would rather stay in the valley, incarcerated, than live free in a group home, out of the area.

This statement comes from someone in the middle of juvenile court and foster care, Inyo County Superior Court Judge Dean Stout, who was recently re-appointed to the state's Blue Ribbon Commission on Children in Foster Care.

"It's a sad situation when kids would rather be in Juvenile Hall than in a group home," Stout said.

This is one of the reasons Stout and the county's Health and Human Services is teaming with the Bishop Paiute Tribe and the Superintendent of Schools on looking at the feasibility of a new group home in the area.

"I've had kids in front of me (at court proceedings) that say, 'Don't send me away, I'm just going to run away again,'" Stout said.

A group home is just one of the measures Stout is looking at to better the lives of youngsters in foster care.

He said the other common scenario for children who are relocated for delinquency, on their part or their parents', is that they do well out of the county, but home life has not changed. Stout said this is another area of concern for foster kids – not adequately addressing their local or home situation.

"Many times these kids return home, but their home life or what led them to be placed (in a foster home) is not addressed and everything they've gained in placement is lost," Stout said.

He said the ideal situation would be to prevent removal of the child from the home and so more there is more discussion on how to best develop programs to keep kids at home.

There are problems with children being placed in homes out of the area, according to Stout, which include the reunification with the family.

He said when kids are placed closer to home, parents can become much more involved and treatment programs can become much more individualized.

He added that there are a disproportionate amount of Native Americans in the juvenile court system and hopes to continue the good relationship with the tribe in addressing these problems. He added that a group home will be a way for the newly established Tribal Court to expand.

Stout is collaborating on the group home with Dave Lent, director of Toiyabe Indian Health Project, as well as Terry McAteer, the county's superintendent of schools. He added that there is already interest from some locals about running the home.

To get a group home up and running will not be easy though. Stout explained that first, land and facilities have to be secured then there is statelicensing and a pile of fees.

The Bernasconi Center in Big Pine, currently used for various school activities and camps, is being eyed as a possible site. The center would be ideal as it has housing and kitchen facilities and is close to Palisade High School.

Stout repeated that the entire group home effort is a collaborative one between the community and department heads from Probation and Health and Human Services.

Some organizations in town already assist children being sent to a group home. Stout said Altrusa International of the Eastern Sierra donated teddy bears to younger kids to help them on their journey, and Rotary will donate luggage to the kids.

The luggage is more of a psychological aid for these youth, so they don't have their belongings in plastic bags, for example, Stout said.

Money, of course, is always the biggest factor in trying to start a new program, but Stout hopes to work through that as well. There are federal dollars to finance this sort of home, Stout said, but things are at the ground level and more research needs to be done.

"We have a lot to learn," Stout added.

Despite the poor economy, Stout said he is “extremely pleased that there continues to be strong bipartisan support for the Commission’s recommendations, and that foster care reform continues to be a priority for the Legislature.”

And this is just what Stout is doing locally. On the Blue Ribbon Commission he serves on the Joint Legislative Implementation Advisory Group that develops, analyzes and responds to proposed legislation. Bishop City council member and foster parent Jeff Griffiths, who also chairs the county’s subcommittee focusing on recruitment and retention of foster parents, said that it is of great benefit to the area to have a local representative on a statewide commission.

“The needs of foster kids in rural areas are very different from that of those from urban areas,” Griffiths said, adding that Stout helps make the rural area voice heard.

The new group home and focus on individual treatment plans are part of the Blue Ribbon Commission’s larger vision and set of recommendations and reforms to foster care statewide.

Some of these recommendations include better case management and data exchange and performance measures.

Nearly half of the state’s 75,000 foster children remain in care for two or more years; 17 percent of them for more than three years. According to the Blue Ribbon Commission, children who grow up in foster care face “a significantly increased risk of unemployment, homelessness, mental illness and involvement with the criminal justice system.”

The Inyo County Board of Supervisors will hear a presentation by Health and Human Services about the group home today at its regular meeting in Independence.

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